

A Motivated Audience:  
An Analysis of Motivated Reasoning and Presidential Campaign Debates

By

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Kevin J. Mullinix

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Chairperson Mark R. Joslyn

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Donald P. Haider-Markel

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Michael S. Lynch

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The Thesis Committee for Kevin J. Mullinix

certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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**ABSTRACT:**

Recent innovations in psychology bolster an information processing theory of motivated reasoning. However, there are few attempts to apply the theory outside of a laboratory setting, and it is limited in its application to only a few political phenomena. I argue that presidential campaign debates present unique case studies to test the theory. There is a wealth of scholarly literature that examines presidential debates. Much of this research examines the effects of debates on learning political information, candidate evaluation, and vote choice. Only a few of these studies are buttressed with a psychological model of how individuals process information. In this study I apply motivated reasoning to disentangle the mechanisms through which individuals process debate information. Using national panel data sets, I analyze pre and post responses to presidential debates in both 1996 and 2008. I find strong support for a prior attitude effect and polarization. More interestingly and consistent with theory, the effects are conditioned by levels of interest. The effects of campaign debates are strongest for motivated individuals with high levels of interest. This study presents a propitious opportunity to fill gaps in existing literature and provide a fruitful test and extension of an emerging theory.

## INTRODUCTION:

Much of political science research concerns how people make sense of what Walter Lippmann (1925, p. 24) called the “mystery off there,” and the “swarming confusion of problems.” Politics is complex. As such, research strives to understand how people not only perceive their political world, but how they process, interpret, and evaluate political information. Some scholars build theoretical frameworks using assumptions concerning the rational faculties of individuals (Downs 1957). Other work recognizes the cognitive limitations of individuals and emphasizes a bounded rationality (Simon 1985). Research in psychology suggests that people cope with cognitive limitations by using heuristics, shortcuts, stereotypes, and schemas to simplify and organize information (Lau 2003). Recent innovations in psychology suggest that individuals do not simply organize and process information in an even-handed and objective manner. Instead, individuals unconsciously employ motives and biases in their processing of political information (Taber and Lodge 2006; Lodge and Taber 2005).

Methodological and theoretical advances have uncovered these biases and bolster support for the theory of motivated reasoning (Burdein et al. 2006; Kim et al. 2010; Lebo and Cassino 2007; Lodge and Taber 2005; Taber et al. 2009; Taber and Lodge 2006; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Redlawsk et al. 2010). This emerging literature examines the mechanisms involved in information processing. Mullinix (2011), states that “the theory unites affect and cognition to assert that an individual’s prior attitudes toward people, groups, and issues will bias how he or she processes new information concerning those topics” (p66). The theory is often coupled with five related hypotheses. First, there is a prior attitude effect where individuals view evidence congruent with prior attitudes as more compelling. Second and closely related, there is a confirmation bias where individuals seek out confirming arguments over disconfirming

arguments. Next, there is a disconfirmation bias where people counter-argue information that is incongruent with prior attitudes. Fourth, the biases result in polarization and the promotion of more extreme attitudes. Finally, evidence suggests that these effects are heightened for the most politically aware individuals with high levels of sophistication and strong prior attitudes. The theory is strongly supported by laboratory research; however, it is rarely examined outside the laboratory setting and it has been quite limited in its application to political phenomena. I suggest that presidential campaign debates provide excellent case studies to test the theory outside of a laboratory and apply it to an important political activity.

Presidential campaign debates present the citizenry with an opportunity to learn about the candidates and their respective policy preferences. There is a large and diverse body of literature that examines debates for their strategies and effects on the viewing public. Some scholars specifically examine rhetoric, framing, and priming effects (Fridkin et al. 2007; Jerit 2009). Other researchers highlight the influence of debates on political learning, and candidate and issue-specific knowledge (Miller and MacKuen 1979; Wald and Lupfer 1978; Benoit and Hansen 2004; Lemert 1993; Holbrook 1999). In analyzing the source of debate effects, only a few studies explicitly examine individual level psychological theories. One study unites framing and priming literature with schema theory (Hwang et al. 2007). Other analyses employ cognitive consistency theory (Abramowitz 1978; Sigelman and Sigelman 1984; Lanoue 1992). The small number of studies that actually employ a psychological theory often lack precision in their explanations and predictions. For example, cognitive consistency theory helps explain why individuals may reinforce their existing attitudes towards candidates in a debate, but it fails to explain who is most likely to engage in these practices. Thus, the state of research inadequately addresses the cognitive processes through which individuals respond to debates.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an appropriate and logical extension of motivated reasoning to fill gaps in the existing presidential campaign debate literature. The study tests the motivated reasoning theory outside of the laboratory with nationally representative samples. The theory presents a novel opportunity to explain why individuals respond to debates in the manner that they do. Using panel data from the first presidential debates in both 1996 and 2008, I test for a prior attitude effect, polarization, and heightened effects for the most politically interested individuals. In doing so, this analysis speaks to the inability of individuals to even-handedly process and evaluate political information without bias.

The paper is divided into several sections. First, I provide a more thorough discussion of the motivated reasoning theory. Next, I present a review of the presidential campaign debate literature. Building on the theory and literature, I explicitly illuminate hypotheses for testing. I then present my research design, operationalization of variables, and results. Finally, the implications of the study are examined in a concluding section.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:**

Motivated reasoning is a theory that addresses how people process, evaluate, and respond to incoming information. Before examining its elements, I believe it is necessary to first discuss its origins. Motivated reasoning's underlying assumptions are rooted in psychology and information processing (Kunda 1990; Druckman et al. 2009)<sup>1</sup>. In the early stages of its application to politics (Lodge and Taber 2000), the theory was perceived as an extension and outgrowth of online processing models (Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge et al. 1995). Online processing models suggest that individuals keep a running tally of evaluations that is used for

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<sup>1</sup> Herrmann (2003) traces the origins of motivated reasoning in respect to image theory and international relations to Richard Cottam (1977) whose work builds upon the balance theory of Fritz Heider (1958).

political evaluations. Online processing models are typically contrasted with memory based models where individuals store and access information in their memory. Although the online models are open to the inclusion of affect, they are typically perceived as “cold” cognition models. That is, online processing is a simple cognitive strategy where individuals keep a running evaluative tally.

Building upon online processing, motivated reasoning adds several elements. First, affect is given a central role which has led to the “hot cognition hypothesis.” The hot cognition hypothesis argues that “all sociopolitical concepts are affect laden” (Lodge and Taber 2005, pp. 456). Mullinix (2011) states that “In sum, individuals develop affective charges concerning various topics over time, and these prior motivations significantly influence how people process new information” (pp. 5). The affective charges are activated automatically within milliseconds upon exposure to a concept (Lodge and Taber 2005). The automaticity of affect is often measured using timed implicit association and response latency tests that buttress support for the unconscious influence of affect on political evaluations (Burdein et al. 2006; Lodge and Taber 2005).

Second, the role of affect leads to predictable biases. If all political concepts are affect-laden and the affect is triggered unconsciously and automatically upon exposure to a concept, then the activation of the affect will influence how an individual processes incoming information. Tests of motivated reasoning document support for five common hypotheses: a prior attitude effect, confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias, polarization, and heightened effects for political sophisticates (Taber and Lodge 2006). The prior attitude effect suggests that individuals are likely to perceive arguments congruent with their prior attitudes as stronger than opposing arguments. Closely related is the confirmation bias where individuals are more likely to

seek out confirming arguments over disconfirming arguments. The disconfirmation bias suggests that individuals will use more time and cognitive resources to counter argue incongruent arguments than congruent arguments. These biases result in polarization and more extreme attitudes when people have been exposed to both pro and con arguments. Strong evidence from experimental settings supports these effects with respect to a number of political issues (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber et al. 2009).

Finally, motivated reasoning suggests that the individuals most likely and most apt to employ these biases are highly politically sophisticated, knowledgeable, and interested citizens. Also, they are the individuals with the strongest prior attitudes and motivations (Taber and Lodge 2006). Politically sophisticated and interested individuals with stronger attitudes and motivations are likely to have stronger unconscious affect. The stronger attitudes and affect are shown to facilitate biases and influence reaction times (Lodge and Taber 2005). The unconscious affect filters the processing of information. The more politically sophisticated an individual is, the more likely he or she has stronger motivations and affect that bias the processing of political information.

Lebo and Cassino (2007) use partisan attachments as motivations to examine presidential approval, and find support for the theory. Kim et al. (2010) develop a computational model of the citizen as a motivated reasoner and find support for these effects for candidate evaluations. Research does suggest that there is a “tipping point” for motivated reasoners confronted with information incongruent with expectations (Redlawsk et al. 2010). That is, when presented with large amount of information that is inconsistent with prior attitudes, there is a threshold at which individuals no longer reinforce priors nor push away the opposing information. Despite the rich



empirical support for the theory, there are only a few applications of the theory beyond the laboratory setting (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Kim et al. 2010; Lebo and Cassino 2007).

Taken together, the theory provides a precise explanation and prediction for how individuals will process new information. All political concepts are affect-laden, and this affect is triggered automatically upon exposure to a concept. This unconscious affect biases how people evaluate the incoming information, which in turn leads to a polarization of attitudes. Individuals who are more politically sophisticated, and have stronger prior attitudes accentuate these biases. Thus, motivated reasoning provides an excellent opportunity to understand how people process and evaluate candidates, opposing arguments, and information in presidential debates.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

Presidential debates have been analyzed from multiple perspectives. Researchers have tackled a myriad of issues surrounding campaign debates using a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. Some scholars analyze presidential debates from a historical and descriptive perspective, and have documented their growth (Swerdlow 1987; Jamieson 1996). Other research examines the role of television and debates, and highlights the political benefits of campaign debates. These benefits can include the role of debates to reveal candidate communication competence, increase accountability, check manipulative tendencies, prepare candidates for office, and reduce costs of reaching voters (Jamieson 1987). Other literature specifically discusses the influence of presidential debates on voting and voter turnout (Gallup, Jr. 1987). Some research takes a comprehensive approach to debates and examines the role of television, debate format, coverage, effects, and policy (Kraus 2000; Hellweg et al 1992;

Jamieson and Birdsell 1988). Despite the breadth of studies concerning debates, I will provide a brief review of a few specific analyses in the literature.

The importance of rhetoric for both campaign debates and the office of the President is well-documented (Campbell and Jamieson 2008; Jamieson 1988). Due to its significance, several studies examine campaign debates from a perspective of rhetorical strategy. Jerit (2009) compares dueling policy predictions that employ differing rhetorical strategies to help understand the impact of competing frames in debates. She finds evidence that strategies of predictive appeals and direct rebuttals have different impacts on the viewer. Examining televised discourse broadly, Mutz (2007) reveals that even camera angles can influence perceptions of civility and legitimacy.

Other research highlights the influence and effects of campaign debates. Lanoue and Schrott (1989) find significant opinion change in response to televised presidential debates. They suggest explanations involving oratory skills and issue positions. Other scholars highlight substantial, significant, and lasting presidential debate effects on public opinion and candidate evaluations (Shaw 1992). One intriguing study documents not only that citizens can be influenced by the arguments made by candidates in the debate, but also by the media's instant analysis of debate performance (Fridkin et al. 2007). The authors use framing and priming theory to not only understand how the candidates can influence opinions, but how particular media coverage can emphasize certain characteristics and prime evaluations. Certainly, framing and priming theories are rooted in psychology, but they are limited in their ability to explain the precise mechanisms through which individuals process information. For example, little attention is given to the importance and influence of the characteristics of the individual watching the debate. Instead, the focus is only on the frame, source, and content of a message. Hwang et al.

(2007) address some of these individual-level concerns by uniting framing, priming, and schema theory. However, their focus is on post-debate news analysis, and not the debate itself.

A larger body of literature analyzes the influence of campaign debates on political learning and knowledge. One study finds that people do learn from debates, but this learning is influenced by context (Holbrook 1999). The author finds that early debates generate more learning, and people tend to learn more about unfamiliar candidates. Miller and Mackuen (1979) boldly assert that “The 1976 presidential debates produced a better informed electorate than would have been the case without them. Watching the debates increased the level of manifest information that all citizens had about the candidates regardless of their education, political involvement, or general information-seeking habits” (pp. 344). Jamieson (2000) documents similar results in more recent elections. Other research finds support for political learning from debates, as well as effects for global attitudes and basic orientations to the political system (Wald and Lupfer 1978). Benoit and Hansen (2004) provide evidence that debates can instill knowledge and change impressions of candidate character. Some scholars situate their studies of debates and political learning in the literature surrounding the “knowledge gap” (Lemert 1993). The author claims “Flawed and underemphasized as the 1988 presidential debates may have been, they added to citizens’ knowledge base” (pp. 93).

To adequately grasp the effects of campaign debates, scholars must not only examine the outcomes and effects of debates on opinion, but also the underlying mechanisms that explain why the effects occur. For example, Benoit and Hansen (2004) find that debates are more likely to strengthen existing preferences rather than alter vote preference. Despite the findings, the authors fail to thoroughly explain why this occurred. The authors point to previous studies on issue learning and character perception, but they lack a psychological justification for their

results. Other research also reveals that the influence of campaign events, including debates, is conditional on previous preferences and partisans dispositions (Hillygus and Jackman 2003). Similar to Benoit and Hansen, these authors lend support to the idea that individuals who watch the debate are likely to reinforce and be influenced by preexisting preferences, but the authors inadequately explain why this occurs. Other studies also document the ability of debates to strengthen existing opinions but do not provide a strong theoretical explanation (Sears et al. 1964; Holbert 2005). Opinion reinforcement is not an entirely new finding. Although not specifically discussing presidential campaign debates, Klapper (1960, p. 15) concludes that “mass communication functions far more frequently as an agent of reinforcement than as an agent of change.” Kinder (2003 p. 370) discusses presidential campaigns broadly and asserts that “For many partisans, the details brought forward by any particular campaign are simply further corroboration of their party’s comparative virtuosity.”

Several researchers find results of attitude reinforcement, and use a psychological theory of cognitive consistency (Lanoue 1992; Abramowitz 1978; Sigelman and Sigelman 1984; Abelson et al. 1968). In discussing this theory, Abramowitz (1978) states “there is a strain toward consistency among attitudes. Inconsistency tends to produce psychological discomfort; therefore, inconsistent attitudes tend to be unstable” (pp. 681). Scholars use cognitive consistency to explain why presidential debates reinforce existing predispositions rather than substantially change opinions. Sigelman and Sigelman (1984) assert that “In any event, it is clear that the public does not approach presidential debates cognitively unencumbered and determined to weigh the evidence even-handedly. Only when the powerful impacts of prior beliefs and preferences are considered can one fully understand why presidential debates have not had the marked influence on election outcomes that many early observers anticipated” (pp 627). These

cognitive consistency studies certainly made progress in our understanding of what debate effects occur, and why they do so. However, they are quite limited in their precision and specificity. Additionally, they fail to adequately explain who is most likely to engage in the attitude reinforcement. Lanoue (1992) is an exception, and uses cognitive consistency to examine opinion reinforcement in debates, but also includes political knowledge as a mediating variable. Lanoue finds that voters in the lower-middle category of political knowledge are most strongly influenced by the debate and its subsequent media coverage. However, motivated reasoning would seem to challenge this finding by suggesting that the most politically sophisticated individuals are the most likely to employ biases.

Thus, extant literature on presidential debates is quite diverse. Debates are analyzed from a variety of perspectives. Despite the wealth of research, there remains a significant gap in the literature. Researchers have yet to adequately and comprehensively explain what debate effects are likely to occur, why they happen, and who is most likely to be influenced by the debates. Previous psychological and political theories lack the precision and explanatory power to sufficiently address each of these concerns. However, motivated reasoning has the potential to adequately address these particular issues. The theory suggests that people's prior attitudes will bias their filtering of political information as they perceive congruent arguments as stronger than incongruent arguments. The confirmation and disconfirmation biases provide explanatory mechanisms behind the prior-attitude effects and the resulting polarization. However, in this project I do not directly test for the seeking out of confirming arguments and the counter arguing of incongruent arguments. Most importantly, motivated reasoning goes beyond previous presidential campaign debate studies to suggest that the effects will be strongest for the most politically interested.

### *Hypotheses*

Building upon the literature and theory presented, I will test three related hypotheses.

*H1: Prior Attitude Effect: Individuals with prior attitudes (partisans) are more likely to evaluate the candidate with congruent attitudes positively than the candidate with incongruent attitudes.*

*H2: Polarization: Attitudes towards candidates will become more extreme when partisans have been exposed to pro and con arguments in the debate.*

*H3: Sophistication and Interest: Effects of biases and polarization in candidate evaluations will be stronger for individuals with prior attitudes and high levels of political interest.*

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA:**

To test these hypotheses with the presidential campaign debates, I use two separate data sets. First, I use a 2008 Los Angeles Times and Bloomberg News panel data set. The pre-debate survey was conducted between September 19<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008 and the post-debate survey was conducted between September 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The survey was completed using random selections of telephone numbers. This sample includes landline and cell phones with listed and unlisted phone numbers for the entire nation. The resulting pre-debate sample includes 1,428 men and women 18 years of age or older. This includes 1,287 registered voters and 838 likely voters. The post-debate survey includes a total 701 individuals, with 448 individuals who watched the first televised presidential debate in 2008. The debate between Barack Obama and John McCain took place on September 26, 2008 at the University of Mississippi. The debate primarily consisted of two major themes. Roughly 40% of the debate centered on the financial

crisis in the United States, and the remaining 60% of the debate concerned international crises including Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia.

Second, I use a Los Angeles Times panel data set from 1996. The pre-debate survey was conducted between October 3<sup>rd</sup> and October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1996. The post-debate survey was completed between October 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, 1996. The survey was done with telephone interviews of a nationwide sample. The pre-debate sample includes 2,298 adults. The post-debate survey includes 896 individuals who watched the debate. The debate between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole took place on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1996 in Hartford, Connecticut. The debate covered a variety of subjects including the economy, employment, crime, welfare, healthcare, taxation, illegal drugs, assault weapons, and international relations.

*Variable Selection:*

Each of the three hypotheses will be tested with eight different dependent variables. The operationalization the dependent variables is discussed in greater detail in the results section. In the 2008 study, I employ four dependent variables. The variables are selected and modeled to test the change in evaluation of the candidates that occurs after viewing the debate. The first and second dependent variables examine the change in affect and feeling towards each candidate before and after the debate. The third and fourth dependent variables from the 2008 data reflect changes in confidence about each candidate's ability to "deal wisely with an international crisis." This variable was selected due to the extensive amount of time spent on international crises issues during this particular debate.

I also include four dependent variables for testing from the 1996 data set. First, I look at the change in perceived attacking. Partisans should reinforce their motivations by shifting towards believing that the opposing candidate attacked more in the debate. Next, I examine a

variable of Clinton's job approval. The third and fourth dependent variables from the 1996 data set are built upon the changes in impressions of both Clinton and Dole. Thus, all eight of the dependent variables are selected and constructed to assess the change that occurs in different types of candidate evaluations after viewing the debate. The distributions of the dependent variables are shown in graphics in the Appendix.

To address the prior attitudes hypothesis (*H1*), an independent variable of party identification is included. Conceptualization of party identification as a prior attitude, underlying motivation, and affective attachment is consistent with other researching employing motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006; Gaines et al. 2007; Lebo and Cassino 2007). Individuals reporting independent but leaning towards one party are categorized as independents. To address political sophistication, a variable of political interest is included. It ranges from very uninterested to very interested (higher scores denoting higher levels of interest). In the test of *H3*, partisanship and interest are interacted to gauge the influence of prior attitudes mediated by levels of interest. As Barack Obama was campaigning to become the first black President of the United States, race was a clear issue in 2008. To control for this, a dichotomous variable of black and non-black is included in the 2008 study. The 1996 includes a dichotomous race variable of white and non-white. Education is also included as a control variable in the analysis. Finally, pre-debate affect, confidence, attack, job approval, and impressions are included as controls in their respective models.

Ordinary least squares regression is used to test the hypotheses and estimate the magnitude and direction of influence.



## RESULTS FROM 2008 DATA:

To test the hypotheses, I first examine changes in affect towards Obama. If *H1* is supported, individuals with prior attitudes should reinforce those attitudes by developing more positive feelings toward the candidate with congruent attitudes. Individuals were asked, “Do you have a positive or negative feeling about Barack Obama/John McCain? [If yes then] Is it very or only somewhat [positive/negative]?” Thus, scores range from very positive (Scored 1) to very negative (Scored 5). The same question was asked after the debate. To measure the change, the post-debate affect was simply subtracted from the pre-debate affect. This resulted in a scale from -4 to 4. Negative scores are examples where the individual had less positive feelings towards Obama after the debate, and a positive score reflects more positive feelings after the debate. A zero denotes an individual who had no change. Although not explicitly tested in this paper, motivated reasoning suggests that this also occurs through the confirming congruent information in the debate and resisting disconfirming and incongruent arguments. Here prior attitudes are measured with partisanship. In these models, independents are excluded and Democrats are coded as a 1 and Republicans are 0. Independents are excluded because they do not possess these partisan motivations. *H2* will be supported if polarization occurs. More importantly, *H3* will be supported if there is a significant interaction between interest and party identification that reinforces prior attitudes. This would suggest that partisans who are more interested in politics should become more polarized in their affect towards Obama after viewing the debate. In sum, after viewing the debate Democrats should become more favorable towards Obama and Republicans should become less favorable. These effects should be heightened for the most interested individuals.

Table 1 shows the regression models for change in affect towards Obama. Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Consistent with *H1* and significant, Democrats develop more positive feelings towards Obama after the debate (Coef. = .955,  $p < .000$ ). Models 2 and 3 show the regression, but only for the subsamples of Democrats and Republicans. It is important to note the magnitude and direction of the interest coefficient in these models. For Democrats, more interested individuals develop more positive affect towards Obama (Coef. = .140,  $p < .159$ ), but interested Republicans develop more negative feelings (Coef. = -.227,  $p < .133$ ). The full model with the interaction between party and interest is seen in Model 4. The interaction is significant ( $p < .050$ ). These models reveal not only that Democrats develop more positive feelings and Republicans develop more negative feelings towards Obama, but these effects are conditioned by levels of political interest. The most interested partisans have heightened effects. Figure 1 provides a clear illustration of the interaction between party identification and political interest. It shows the expected values for the change in affect for Obama by party at different levels of interest while holding other variables constant. The graphic demonstrates the importance of the interaction, and its implications for polarization among the most interested respondents. These results provide consistent support for each of the hypotheses.

Table 1: Change in Affect Towards Obama

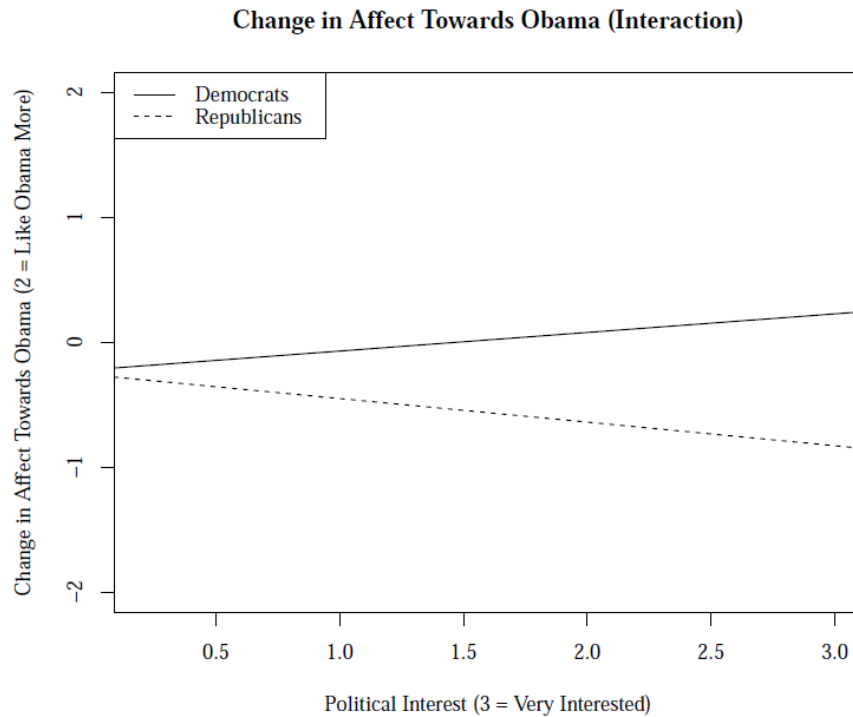
Variable	Model 1	Model 2 Democrats	Model 3 Republicans	Model 4 Interaction
Pre-Obama Affect	.377*** (.043)	.302*** (.048)	.496*** (.080)	.387*** (.043)
Black	.217 (.164)	.165 (.136)	—	.208 (.163)
Education	.088** (.038)	.056 (.040)	.122 (.078)	.089** (.038)
Democrat	.955*** (.152)	—	—	.043 (.487)
Interest	-.015 (.086)	.140 (.099)	-.227 (.150)	-.189 (.123)
Party * Interest	—	—	—	.338** (.171)
Constant	-1.741*** (.342)	-.993** (.332)	-1.775*** (.573)	-1.302*** (.407)
Adj. $R^2$	.214	.186	.262	.223
Res. SE	.706	.583	.849	.702
N	270	165	105	270

Note: Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Model 2 includes only Democrats. Model 3 includes only Republicans, the race variable is excluded due to collinearity. Model 4 is the full interaction model. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Significance codes '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ , '\*\*'  $p < .05$ , '\*'  $p < .10$

Source: Los Angeles Times and Bloomberg News poll, September 19-22 and 26-28, 2008.

Figure 1:



Note: The figure shows the interaction between party identification and political interest, holding all other variables constant. Pre-Obama Affect held at median of 2, race is held at the mode white, and education held at the median of 3. Positive scores on change in affect towards Obama reflect a shift towards liking Obama more. Negative scores reflect a change of liking less.

Using the same variable construction as change in affect towards Obama, the tests are applied to changes in affect towards McCain. Positive scores reflect the development of more positive feelings towards McCain after viewing the debate. The results are in Table 2. Model 1 shows the basic regression without an interaction. Democrats develop more negative feelings towards McCain after viewing the debate (Coef. =  $-.808$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). This lends support to first hypothesis. Models 2 and 3 show the influence of interest by party. Among Democrats, more interested individuals develop more negative feelings towards McCain (Coef. =  $-.207$ ,  $p < .193$ ), while interested Republicans become more positive (Coef. =  $.069$ ,  $p < .496$ ). The direction of the changes for interested partisans is consistent with expectations. The full interaction model is seen

in Model 4. The interaction does not reach significance at the .05 level ( $p = .147$ ). Thus, the coefficients concerning the interaction between party and levels of political interest are in the direction consistent with the hypotheses, but the interaction is not significant. Figure 2 provides a visual display of the interaction. The change in slope for interested Democrats is quite evident in the figure. These results lend partial support to the hypotheses.

Table 2: Change in Affect Towards McCain

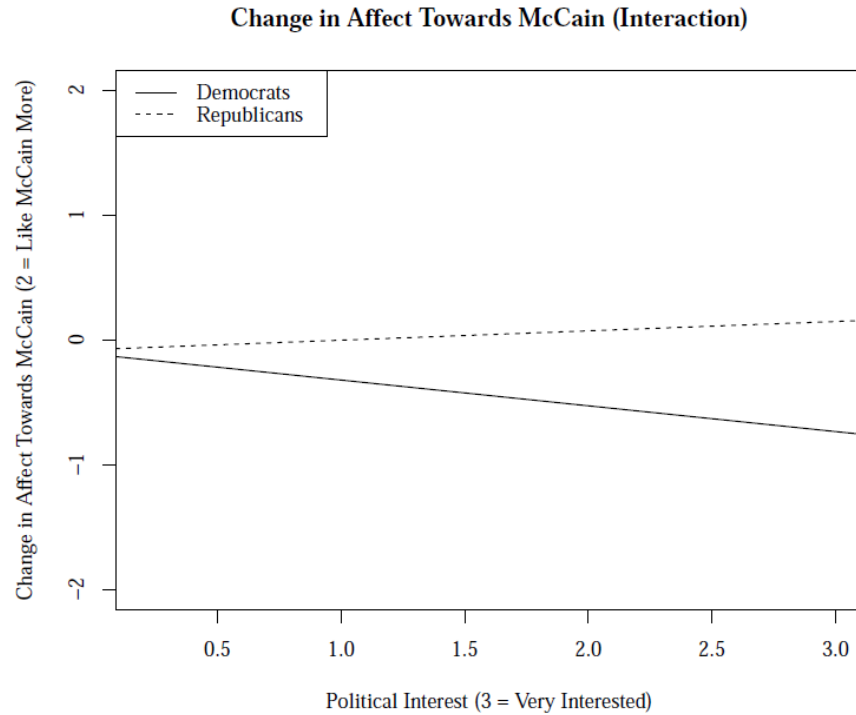
Variable	Model 1	Model 2 Democrats	Model 3 Republicans	Model 4 Interaction
Pre-McCain Affect	.356*** (.050)	.368*** (.063)	.331*** (.089)	.361*** (.050)
Black	-.369** (.185)	-.353* (.213)	—	-.357 (.185)
Education	-.006 (.042)	.001 (.060)	-.011 (.053)	-.004 (.042)
Democrat	-.808*** (.165)	—	—	-.038 (.555)
Interest	-.062 (.097)	-.207 (.159)	.069 (.101)	.075 (.135)
Party * Interest	—	—	—	-.281 (.193)
Constant	-.392 (.321)	-.864 (.537)	-.706* (.373)	-.787* (.420)
Adj. $R^2$	.167	.187	.090	.171
Res. SE	.802	.918	.597	.800
N	273	162	111	273

Note: Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Model 2 includes only Democrats. Model 3 includes only Republicans, the race variable is excluded due to collinearity. Model 4 is the full interaction model. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Significance codes '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ , '\*\*'  $p < .05$ , '\*'  $p < .10$

Source: Los Angeles Times and Bloomberg News poll, September 19-22 and 26-28, 2008.

Figure 2:



Note: The figure shows the interaction between party identification and political interest, holding all other variables constant. Pre-McCain affect held at median of 2, race is held at mode white, and education is held at median 3. Positive scores on change in affect towards McCain reflect a shift towards liking McCain more. Negative scores reflect a change of liking less.

Next, I turn my analysis to confidence in the candidates' ability to "deal wisely with an international crisis." The following variables and models take the same format as the previous regressions, with only the dependent variable changing. Here the variables reflect the change in confidence in the candidates after viewing the debate. Negative scores report less confidence after viewing the debate, and positive scores report more confidence. If consistent with the theory and the hypotheses, Democrats should become more confident in Obama after viewing the debate and Republicans should become less confident. In Table 3, Model 1 shows the basic regression of changes in confidence in Obama to deal wisely with international crises. As expected and consistent with hypotheses, Democrats become more confident in Obama after

viewing the debate (Coef. = .545,  $p < 0.000$ ). Model 2 looks at Democrats only, and shows that interest has a positive effect (Coef. = .158,  $p < .035$ ). Model 3 only includes Republicans, and it reveals that more interested individuals have less confidence in Obama (Coef. = -.227,  $p < .008$ ). The full model in Model 4 reinforces these results by showing that the interaction between party and interest is significant ( $p < 0.000$ ). Holding all other variables constant, Figure 3 shows the interaction between party identification and interest. This graphic, although a bit puzzling, highlights the importance of the interaction and the role of interest. Among the very uninterested, Republicans actually have more confidence in Obama. However, this relationship reverses and polarizes among the most interested. These results provide strong evidence in support of each of the hypotheses.

Table 3: Changes in Confidence in Obama to Handle International Crises

Variable	Model 1	Model 2 Democrats	Model 3 Republicans	Model 4 Interaction
Pre-Obama Confidence	.469*** (.054)	.473*** (.062)	.546*** (.101)	.497*** (.054)
Black	.022 (.107)	.007 (.100)	—	.014 (.105)
Education	.027 (.025)	.027 (.028)	.023 (.044)	.025 (.024)
Democrat	.545*** (.093)	—	—	-.499 (.307)
Interest	-.032 (.056)	.158** (.074)	-.227*** (.083)	-.225*** (.077)
Party * Interest	—	—	—	.390*** (.109)
Constant	-1.160*** (.251)	-1.151*** (.267)	-.818** (.403)	-.698** (.278)
Adj. $R^2$	.220	.255	.236	.254
Res. SE	.460	.427	.487	.450
N	270	164	106	270

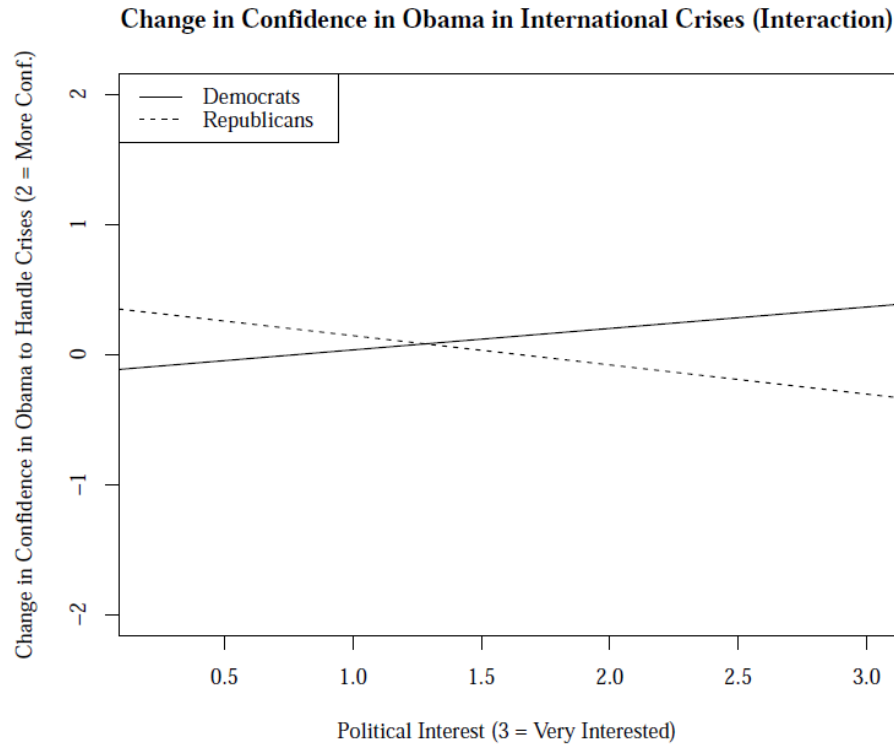
Note: Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Model 2 includes only Democrats. Model 3 includes only Republicans, the race variable is excluded due to collinearity. Model 4 is the full interaction model. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Significance codes '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ , '\*\*'  $p < .05$ , '\*'  $p < .10$

Source: Los Angeles Times and Bloomberg News poll, September 19-22 and 26-28, 2008.



Figure 3:



Note: The figure shows the interaction between party identification and political interest, holding all other variables constant. Pre-Obama confidence held at median of 2, race is mode white, and education is held at median of 3. Positive scores reflect a change towards more confidence, and negative scores reflect less confidence.

Next, I apply the same methods of analysis to changes in confidence in McCain to handle international crises after the debate. In Table 4, Model 1 shows the basic regression without any interaction. Democrats have lower levels of confidence in McCain after viewing the debate (Coef. =  $-.476$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Examining only Democrats in Model 2, more interested individuals have lower levels of confidence (Coef. =  $-.122$ ,  $p < .209$ ). Model 3 shows the results for only Republicans, and reveals that more interested individuals have higher levels of confidence (Coef. =  $.076$ ,  $p < .298$ ). Model 4 shows the interaction between party and interest, and approaches significance ( $p = .094$ ). Figure 4 displays the interaction and buttresses these results. More interested Democrats become less confident in McCain to handle international crises after

viewing the debate. More interested Republicans become more confident in McCain after watching the debate. These results are consistent with the hypotheses and provide evidence of a prior attitude effect, polarization, and heightened effects for the most interested citizens.

Table 4: Changes in Confidence in McCain to Handle International Crises

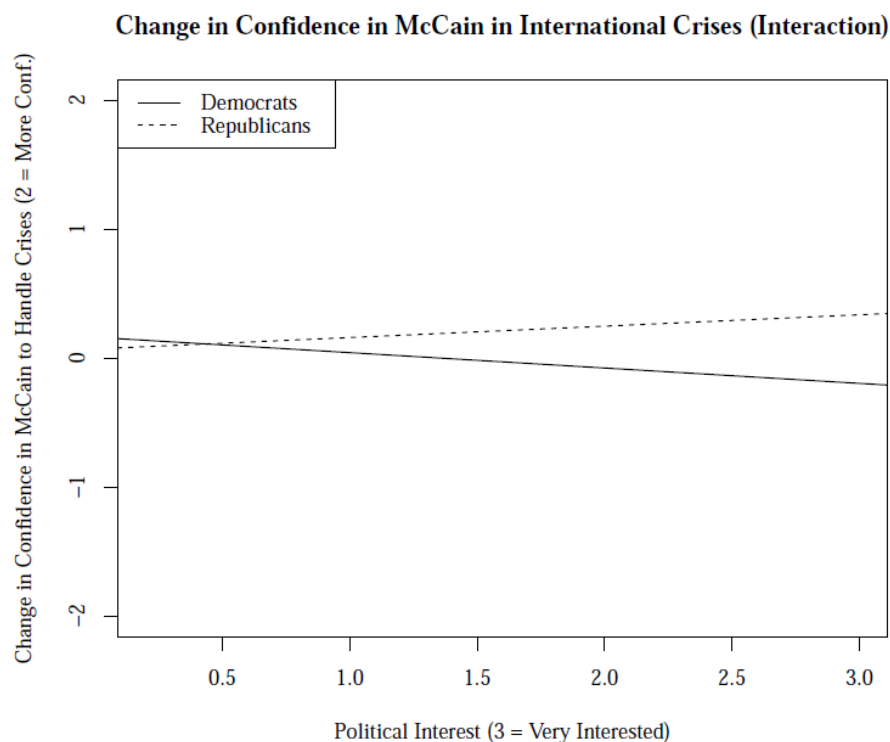
Variable	Model 1	Model 2 Democrats	Model 3 Republicans	Model 4 Interaction
Pre-McCain Confidence	.465*** (.052)	.486*** (.063)	.417*** (.109)	.475*** (.052)
Black	-.107 (.118)	-.093 (.129)	—	-.102 (.118)
Education	.010 (.027)	.040 (.036)	-.039 (.038)	.012 (.027)
Democrat	-.476*** (.089)	—	—	.091 (.348)
Interest	-.010 (.061)	-.122 (.097)	.076 (.073)	.088 (.085)
Party * Interest	—	—	—	-.208* (.123)
Constant	-.622*** (.206)	-.932*** (.316)	-.643** (.289)	-.913*** (.268)
Adj. $R^2$	.221	.269	.109	.227
Res. SE	.504	.546	.429	.503
N	269	160	109	269

Note: Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Model 2 includes only Democrats. Model 3 includes only Republicans, the race variable is excluded due to collinearity. Model 4 is the full interaction model. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Significance codes '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ , '\*\*'  $p < .05$ , '\*'  $p < .10$

Source: Los Angeles Times and Bloomberg News poll, September 19-22 and 26-28, 2008.

Figure 4:



Note: The figure shows the interaction between party identification and political interest, holding all other variables constant. Pre-McCain confidence is held at median of 2, race is mode white, and education is held at median of 3. Positive scores reflect a change towards more confidence, and negative scores reflect less confidence.

## RESULTS FROM 1996 DATA:

The models for the 1996 data follow a similar pattern as the 2008 models, but with different topics. Each of the models will still be testing for a strengthening and reinforcement of prior attitudes through biases, a resulting polarization, and heightened effects for the most politically interested. First, I examine changes in perceived attacking. In the pre-debate survey, respondents were asked “Do you think one candidate will attack his opponent more than the other? [If yes] Do you think (Clinton/Dole) will attack somewhat more than (Clinton/Dole), or much more?” The respondents were asked a similar question again, but post-debate. The possible answers include “Clinton much more,” “Clinton somewhat,” “Neither,” “Dole somewhat,” “Dole

much more.” The post-debate scores are subtracted from the pre-debate scores creating a range from -4 to 4. Positive scores reflect a change towards believing Clinton attacked more and Dole attacked less. Negative scores report a change towards believing Clinton attacked less and Dole attacked more. The post-debate question of who attacked more is a seemingly objective question. However, motivated reasoning suggests that biases will still influence the processing of political information and perception. After viewing the debate, Democrats should shift towards believing that Dole attacked more while Republicans should shift towards believing Clinton attacked more. Table 5 shows the regression of changes in perceived attacking. Model 1 shows the basic regression without an interaction. Democrats shift towards believing Dole attacked more and Clinton attacked less than they had originally thought (Coef. =  $-.534$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Looking at Democrats only, Model 2 shows that more interested individuals shift towards believing Dole attacked more (Coef. =  $-.036$ ,  $p < .611$ ). Model 3 reveals that more interested Republicans shift towards believing Clinton attacked more (Coef. =  $.032$ ,  $p < .623$ ). The full interaction in Model 4 is not significant ( $p < .466$ ). The interaction relationship is also displayed in Figure 5 holding other variables constant. These models provide only partial support of the hypotheses. Individuals are significantly reinforcing their partisan motivations through biases. Despite seeing the same debate, people from each party shift towards perceiving the candidate of the opposing party as attacking more. Although not significant, the more interested individuals in the partisan subsamples do move in the hypothesized direction.

Table 5: Change in Perceived Attacking

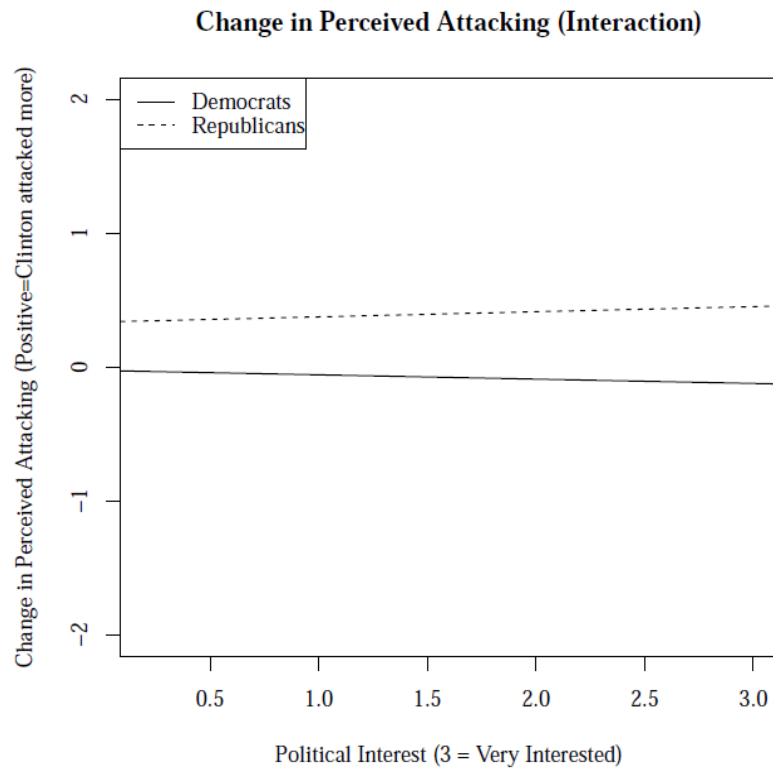
Variable	Model 1	Model 2 Democrats	Model 3 Republicans	Model 4 Interaction
Pre-Debate Attack	.748*** (.035)	.795*** (.054)	.714*** (.047)	.750*** (.036)
Education	-.051* (.029)	-.056 (.039)	-.043 (.043)	-.052* (.029)
White	.066 (.105)	.049 (.112)	.130 (.353)	.062 (.105)
Democrat	-.534*** (.076)	—	—	-.363 (.247)
Interest	.005 (.048)	-.036 (.072)	.032 (.066)	.038 (.066)
Party * Interest	—	—	—	-.071 (.097)
Constant	-2.487*** (.226)	-3.082*** (.325)	-2.529*** (.433)	-2.570*** (.253)
Adj. $R^2$	.449	.424	.474	.448
Res. SE	.783	.798	.769	.783
N	545	294	251	545

Note: Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Model 2 includes only Democrats. Model 3 includes only Republicans. Model 4 is the full interaction model. Positive scores for dependent variable reflect a change towards believing Dole attacked less and Clinton attacked more. Negative scores reflect a change towards believing Clinton attacked less and Dole attacked more. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Significance codes '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ , '\*\*'  $p < .05$ , '\*'  $P < .10$

Source: Los Angeles Times poll, October 3-7, 1996.

Figure 5:



Note: The figure shows the interaction between party identification and political interest, holding all other variables constant. Pre-debate attack opinion is held at median of 4, race is mode white, and education is held at median of 3. Positive scores reflect a change towards believing Dole attacked less and Clinton attacked more. Negative scores are for a change for believing Clinton attacked less and Dole attacked more.

Next, I examine the change in Clinton's job approval after viewing the debate. As the incumbent in the campaign, Clinton's comments during the debate are likely to be processed and taken into account when individuals report their approval of him. Post-debate job approval is subtracted from pre-debate approval resulting in a range from -4 to 4. Negative scores reflect a change towards becoming less approving and positive scores are more approving. The regression models are seen in Table 6. Model 1 shows that Democrats reinforce their motivations by becoming more approving of Clinton (Coef. = .744,  $p < 0.000$ ). Model 2 shows that more interested Democrats become slightly less approving (Coef. = -.011,  $p < .818$ ). This is not consistent with the direction of the hypotheses, but it is not significant either. Model 3 reveals

that more interested Republicans significantly shift towards becoming less approving of Clinton (Coef. = -.213,  $p < .007$ ). The interaction between party identification and interest is significant ( $p < .036$ ). The graphical display of the interaction in Figure 6 shows that interested Democrats do not change much, but interested Republicans are more likely to reinforce their motivations. This does provide support for the hypotheses.

Table 6: Change in Clinton Job Approval

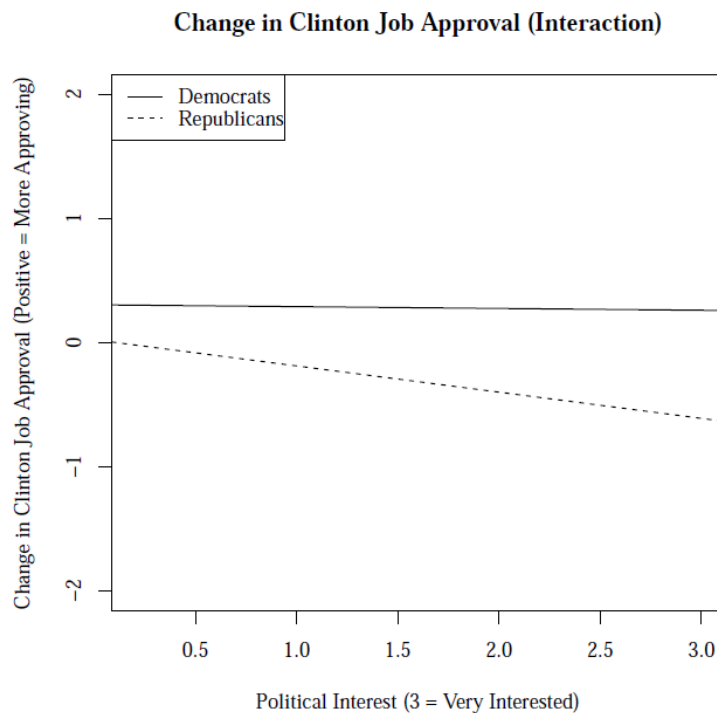
Variable	Model 1	Model 2 Democrats	Model 3 Republicans	Model 4 Interaction
Pre-Clinton Approval	.366*** (.030)	.404*** (.034)	.350*** (.049)	.374*** (.030)
Education	.002 (.028)	-.001 (.027)	.009 (.051)	.004 (.028)
White	-.105 (.102)	-.129* (.077)	.221 (.402)	-.094 (.102)
Democrat	.744*** (.103)	—	—	.281 (.243)
Interest	-.122*** (.046)	-.011 (.050)	-.213*** (.078)	-.211*** (.063)
Party * Interest	—	—	—	.197** (.094)
Constant	-.808*** (.222)	-.374** (.185)	-.861* (.472)	-.641*** (.235)
Adj. $R^2$	.208	.319	.151	.213
Res. SE	.784	.563	.964	.782
N	593	306	287	593

Note: Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Model 2 includes only Democrats. Model 3 includes only Republicans. Model 4 is the full interaction model. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Significance codes '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ , '\*\*'  $p < .05$ , '\*'  $P < .10$

Source: Los Angeles Times poll, October 3-7, 1996.

Figure 6:



Note: The figure shows the interaction between party identification and political interest, holding all other variables constant. Pre-Clinton job approval is held at median of 2, race is mode white, and education is held at median of 3. Positive scores in change in Clinton job approval reflect a change towards more approving. Negative scores reflect a shift towards less approving.

The regression models in Table 7 reflect the change in the impression of Clinton after watching the debate. Respondents were asked “What is your impression of (Bill Clinton/Bob Dole)? As of today, is it very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, very unfavorable, or haven’t heard enough about him to say?” Again, post-debate scores are subtracted from pre-debate scores creating a range from -4 to 4. Negative scores reflect becoming more negative, and positive scores are for a more positive impression of the candidate. As hypothesized, Model 1 reveals that Democrats do become significantly more favorable towards Clinton (Coef. = -.111,  $p < 0.000$ ). The subsamples in Models 2 and 3 reveal that more interested Democrats become less favorable (Coef. = -.074,  $p < .156$ ) and more interested



Republicans also become less favorable (Coef. =  $-.143$ ,  $p < .063$ ). The interested Democrats are not moving in the hypothesized direction, but the coefficient is not significant. The interaction does not reach significance ( $p < .502$ ), thus providing only partial support for the hypotheses.

The interaction relationship is found in Figure 7.

Table 7: Change in Impression of Clinton

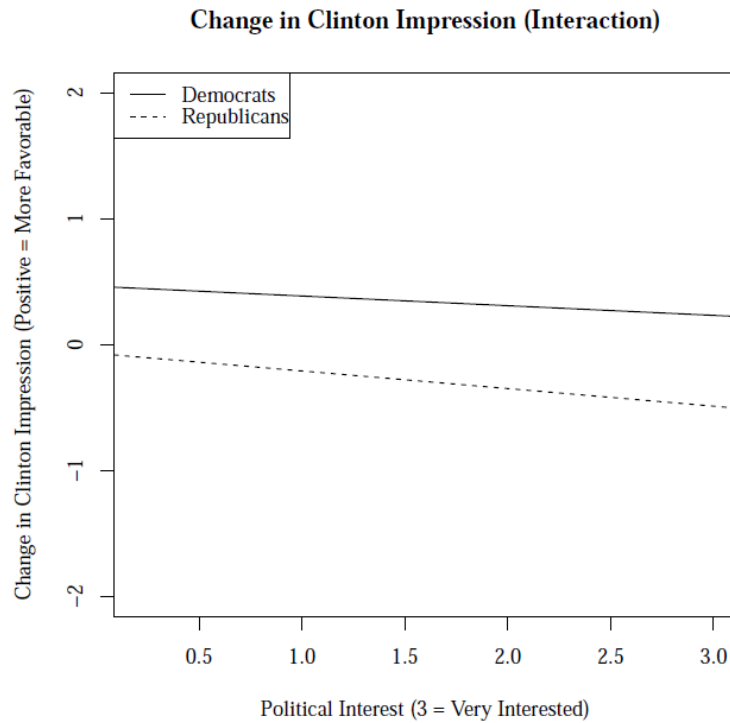
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
		Democrats	Republicans	Interaction
Pre-Clinton Impression	.313*** (.032)	.320*** (.043)	.315*** (.048)	.316*** (.033)
White	-.072 (.103)	-.089 (.083)	.115 (.396)	-.069 (.103)
Education	-.023 (.028)	.005 (.029)	-.057 (.050)	-.023 (.028)
Democrat	.681*** (.102)	—	—	.533** (.243)
Interest	-.111 (.046)	-.074 (.052)	-.143* (.077)	-.140** (.063)
Party * Interest	—	—	—	.063 (.094)
Constant	-.619*** (.217)	-.120 (.195)	-.616 (.459)	-.564** (.232)
Adj. $R^2$	.140	.160	.127	.139
Res. SE	.784	.590	.950	.784
N	593	305	288	593

Note: Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Model 2 includes only Democrats. Model 3 includes only Republicans. Model 4 is the full interaction model. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Significance codes '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ , '\*\*'  $p < .05$ , '\*'  $p < .10$

Source: Los Angeles Times poll, October 3-7, 1996.

Figure 7:



Note: The figure shows the interaction between party identification and political interest, holding all other variables constant. Pre-Clinton impression is held at median of 2, race is mode white, and education is held at median of 3. Positive scores in change in Clinton impression reflect a change towards more favorable. Negative scores reflect a shift towards less favorable.

The final dependent variable is tested in a manner similar to the previous model, but now for the change in the impression of Dole. Negative scores reflect becoming more negative, and positive scores are for a more positive impression of the candidate. Model 1 buttresses the prior attitude hypothesis again by showing that Democrats become significantly less favorable towards Dole (Coef. =  $-.442$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Although not significant, interested Democrats do not move in the hypothesized direction. Instead they become more favorable towards Dole (Coef. =  $.006$ ,  $p < .953$ ). Model 3 reveals that interested Republicans also become more favorable towards Dole after viewing the debate (Coef. =  $.074$ ,  $p < .278$ ). The interaction between party and interest is

not significant ( $p < .738$ ), and is shown in Figure 8. Again, these 1996 models only provide partial support of the hypotheses.

Table 8: Change in Impression of Dole

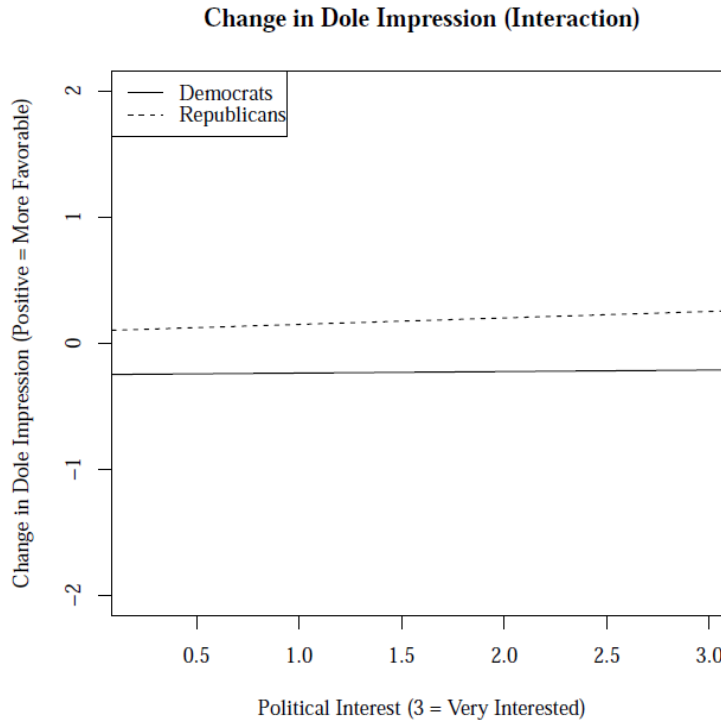
Variable	Model 1	Model 2 Democrats	Model 3 Republicans	Model 4 Interaction
Pre-Dole Impression	.422*** (.036)	.366*** (.054)	.504*** (.049)	.423*** (.037)
White	.147 (.131)	.131 (.157)	.185 (.342)	.145 (.132)
Education	-.027 (.035)	-.043 (.055)	-.019 (.044)	-.027 (.035)
Democrat	-.442*** (.110)	—	—	-.347 (.304)
Interest	.033 (.059)	.006 (.098)	.074 (.068)	.051 (.079)
Party * Interest	—	—	—	-.039 (.117)
Constant	-.768*** (.254)	-.865** (.416)	-1.088*** (.403)	-.811*** (.285)
Adj. $R^2$	.207	.134	.272	.206
Res. SE	.975	1.103	.821	.976
N	573	292	281	573

Note: Model 1 is the basic regression without an interaction. Model 2 includes only Democrats. Model 3 includes only Republicans. Model 4 is the full interaction model. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Significance codes '\*\*\*'  $p < .01$ , '\*\*'  $p < .05$ , '\*'  $p < .10$

Source: Los Angeles Times poll, October 3-7, 1996.

Figure 8:



Note: The figure shows the interaction between party identification and political interest, holding all other variables constant. Pre-Dole impression is held at median of 2, race is mode white, and education is held at median of 3. Positive scores in change in Dole impression reflect a change towards more favorable. Negative scores reflect a shift towards less favorable.

## CONCLUSION:

The purpose of this study was to provide a test and extension of the motivated reasoning theory and fill gaps in the existing presidential campaign debate literature concerning how individuals process information. Motivated reasoning provides a solid explanatory mechanism for understanding what debate effects will occur, why they happen, and who is most likely to be influenced. This paper extends the theory outside of the laboratory and applies it to a national sample. In doing so, the paper provides a test of the prior attitude, polarization, and heightened effects for political sophisticates hypotheses.

In sum, this paper finds support for each of the hypotheses. Prior attitudes, as measured by party identification, are significant predictors in every model in both data sets. Party identification acts as a conscious and unconscious affective attachment that influences how individuals process political information. People's affect, confidence, impressions, perceptions of attacking, and presidential approval are reinforced and strengthened through their partisan perceptions of the debates. The confirmation and disconfirmation biases supported in previous literature, although not explicitly tested here, provide explanatory mechanisms for the strengthening of beliefs and the polarization. Individuals reinforce prior attitudes through their biased filtering of information in the debate by clinging to congruent arguments and counter-arguing incongruent arguments.

Perhaps most importantly, this paper finds evidence for heightened effects among the most politically interested. In the 2008 data, the interaction between party identification and interest is significant in two of the four models at the .05 level (three of the models at the .1 level). Although not always statistically significant, the effects of the interaction move in the hypothesized direction in every instance in the 2008 data. Evidence in the 1996 data is more mixed. In the perceptions of attacking, interested partisans move in the hypothesized direction, but neither their shift nor the interaction is significant. For Clinton's job approval, interest does not appear to matter for Democrats, but more interested Republicans become significantly less approving. The interaction effect for job approval is also significant. Interest does not seem to matter for Democrats in their change in impression of Clinton either. However, interested Republicans do become significantly less approving. The changes in impression of Dole after viewing the debate do not yield any significant results for the hypotheses. Although not presented here, regressions performed for independents (or individuals without a partisan

motivation) are not significant and are not conditioned by levels of interest. Taken together, individuals are biased processors of campaign debate information. People selectively filter the debate information to reinforce their prior attitudes. More so, the individuals who are most likely to bias their perception of the debates are often the most politically interested.

These results have important implications for political science research. First, they speak to the ability of individuals to even-handedly process information and form objective evaluations. People are unconsciously motivated reasoners, and as such, they are biased processors of information. Second, the results have implications for political learning. A large body of the presidential campaign debate literature concerns the ability of debates to foster learning and the development of political knowledge. Although factual knowledge is not tested directly here, the results do point to the possibility that motivations could bias political learning. This is consistent with other research that demonstrates that interpretations of facts are influenced by partisan motivations (Gaines et al. 2007).

Third, despite a consensus about elites, there remains a critical debate in the literature surrounding polarization at the mass level (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Claassen and Highton 2009; Fiorina et al. 2008). For the polarization that is documented in the mass public, this paper suggests an explanatory mechanism. People continually reinforce their attitudes through an unconscious process filled with biases. Fourth, with polarization comes difficulty in compromise. This paper reveals that the most politically interested individuals are likely to be the most polarized. That is, our ideal citizens are the least likely to moderate opinions and form compromises. This suggests implications not only for public opinion, but policy formation and political decision making as well.

Finally, this paper increases our understanding of the function of political interest. Kinder (2003, p. 377) states “That some Americans are deeply interested in politics while others couldn’t care less is widely appreciated, but how this difference is implicated in citizen’s vulnerability to media influence is unclear.” When conceptualized as a facet of political sophistication, political interest can be united with motivated reasoning and understood as a factor that accentuates biases in the processing of information.

Motivated reasoning presents an opportunity to disentangle the mechanisms through which individuals process a myriad of political phenomena. This paper displays its utility to enhance our understanding of how individuals respond to presidential campaign debates. The strong evidence presented here, in addition to previous literature, bolsters motivated reasoning and provides a starting point for further application of the theory beyond the laboratory.

## APPENDIX

Below are the distributions of the eight dependent variables.

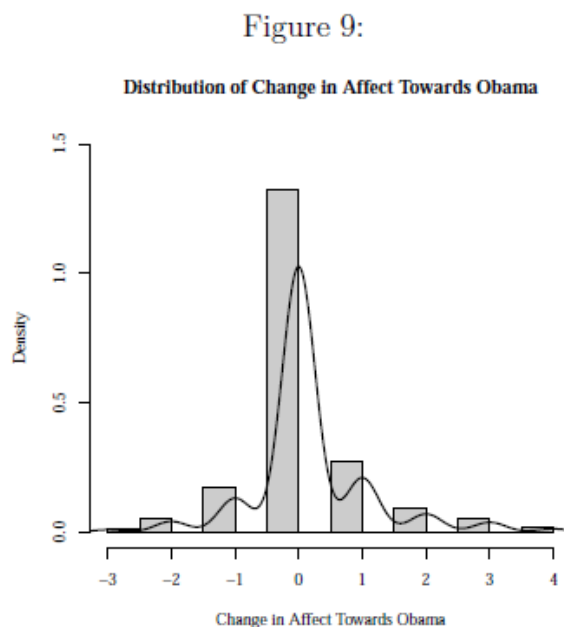


Figure 10:

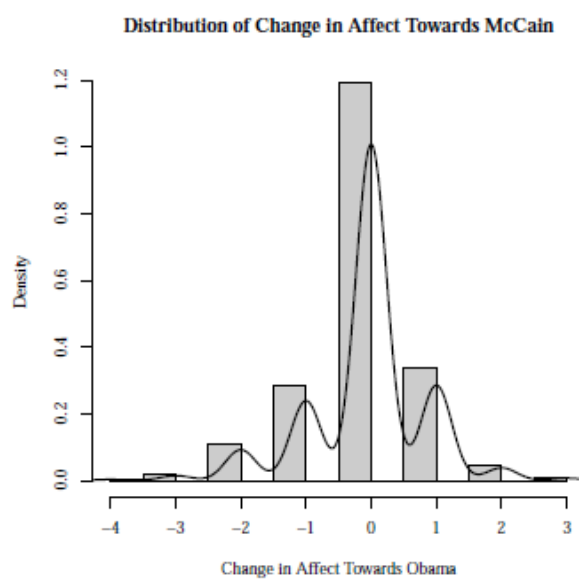


Figure 11:

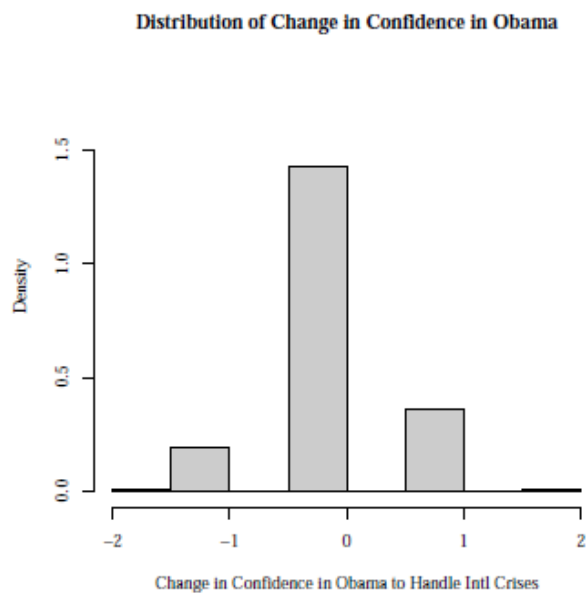




Figure 12:

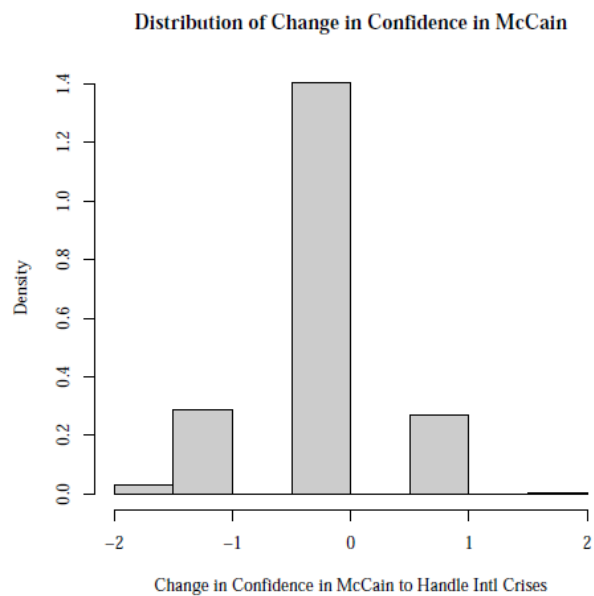


Figure 13:

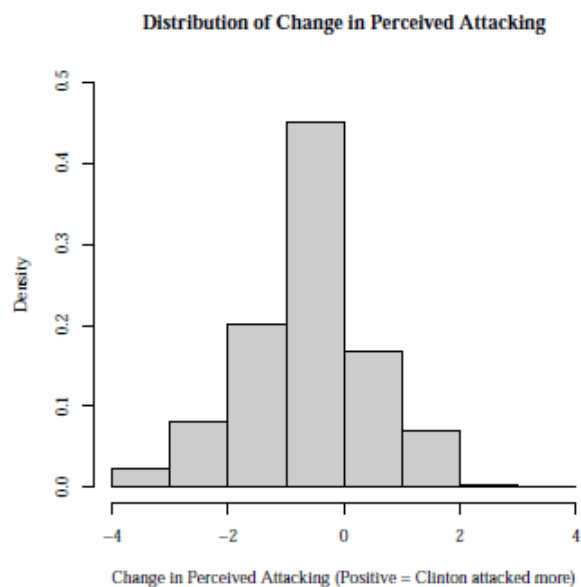


Figure 14:

Distribution of Change in Clinton Job Approval

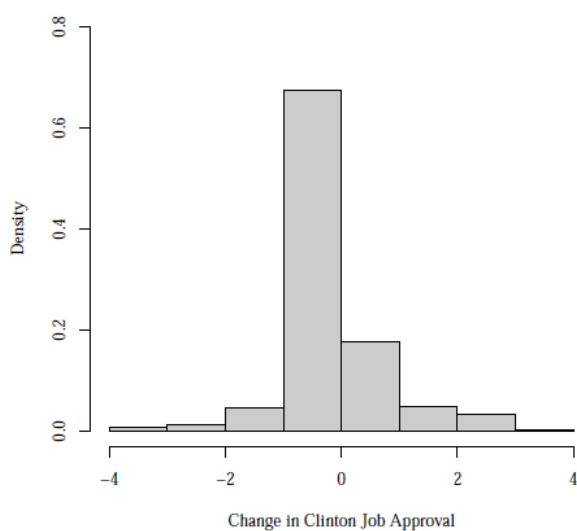


Figure 15:

Distribution of Change in Impression of Clinton

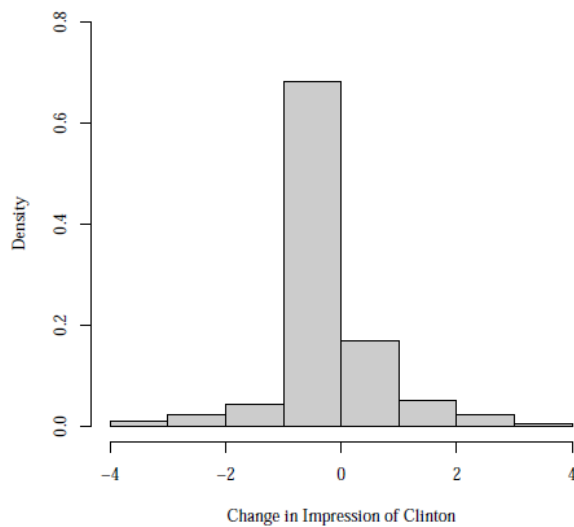
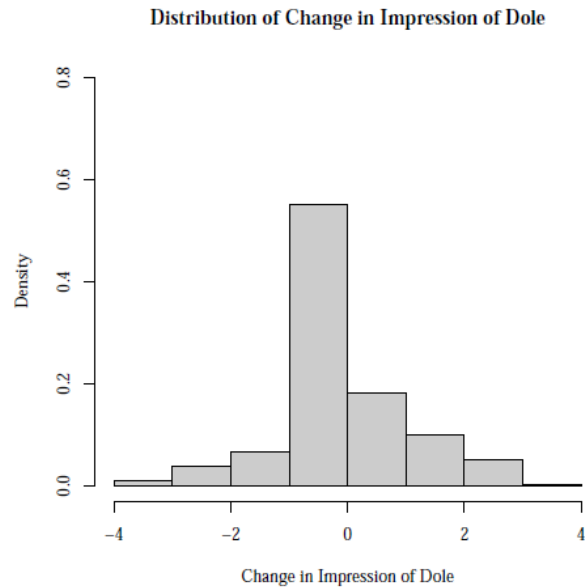


Figure 16:



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